

We Have Seen a Great Light



Advent 2014

Foreword

This collection of half-page devotionals is for reflection and prayer during the season of Advent 2014, November 31st to December 25th.

It has been prepared by members of the Uniting Church in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia who believe that in Jesus was born the Christ. Jesus came to redeem his own: it is a season of joy.

By sharing study and reflection on God's Word and as he speaks that word into ordinary experience we may enjoy encouraging fellowship in Christ and bring praise and glory to our Heavenly Father. We may exclaim with Isaiah 9:2 *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.* Into the darkness of fallen humanity, a great light has shone.

The idea for this collection of devotional reflections by church members came from booklets prepared by congregations ministered to by the Rev. Dr. Ian Hickingbotham of North Ringwood parish. A church member reflects on a selected passage as it relates to their own life and heart. At the end of each a short prayer is offered. In this way, the same confession is read together across the church. Unity in Christ and the joy of Christmas may be shared.



Prepared by members of Uniting Church congregations in South Eastern Australia Advent 2014
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Sunday 30th November

Backwards to Christmas

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Colossians 2:9-10

When we come to the story of Jesus, we follow the trajectory of his life from remarkable birth, through gripping teaching and actions to cruel death and then glorious resurrection and Ascension. **All** seems quite straight-forward really. But ...for the early followers of *The Way*, it was not so straight-forward at all, it was backwards. They went backwards to Christmas. They started at the end of the story: with the power of his death and resurrection, with their experience of him transforming their lives, before they even learned of his birth.

Backwards to Christmas.

In this season of Advent the momentum of activities and preparation will carry us forward to Christmas. Why, we can arrive at Christmas Day without having done any inner reflection at all. We will still get there, just maybe feeling a bit as if we've stayed on the surface when we really wanted to go deeper this year.

Backwards to Christmas? What does that conjure up in your thinking? If we walk backwards then we have to keep glancing behind to see where we are going and we have to think carefully about each step. Try it. Walk a series of paces backwards. Notice how you walk more slowly.

Now think about that in relation to how you are going to journey to Christmas.

These glancing over the shoulder type questions might help:

What is my experience of the transformation of Jesus in my life?

What's the number one story of Jesus - that I am drawn to?

Prayer *Lord, as I walk backwards to Christmas, glancing over my shoulder, help me to see the things you want me to see in this season of Advent. Amen*

Ian Hickingbotham - North Ringwood

Monday, 1st December

In Jesus God Reconciles

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Colossians 1:19-20

God's plan to reconcile all things to Himself through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, is our one and only avenue for salvation. Peter told the Jewish court that Jesus is the only Name, under Heaven, given to men, by which we can be saved. Some people have their own plan for salvation, but they are doomed to failure. Jesus is the **ONLY WAY** to be saved.

In our garden we had a bowl of water for the birds. Bees would also congregate there, sometimes falling in, and sometimes drowning. I noticed several bees swimming, unable to get out. So I picked up a twig from a tree, and lifted them out one by one. Then there was only one left. He was a very smart little bee who had worked out his own plan to save himself. In the centre of the bowl was a cluster of dead bees floating. This clever little guy had climbed aboard as if he was on a raft, still half submerged, very soggy, but still alive. As I placed the piece of wood there for him, he reached up and grabbed it with his front legs, while still cling to the dead bees under him with his back legs. He was saying, "I think I'm saved, but just to be sure I'll hang on to my own plan too. As I began to lift him out, the raft of dead bees under him also began to rise, but the weight was too much for his front legs, and all flopped back into the water. Again I offered him the twig. Again he grabbed it still clinging to the bodies under him, and again flopped back into the water. I did it a third time,- same result. I said "Listen Smartie, let go of those dead things. They can't save you. Grab this piece of wood. Trust me". He did, and in a few moments he was safe, alive, and drying off.

Our God, who wants everyone to be saved, saw the mass of struggling, dying humanity, drowning in their sin. He inserted a piece of wood,- the cross of Jesus, and everyone who comes to Him in repentance and faith, is saved. No plan of salvation worked out by the human mind can ever save anyone, or give them eternal life. Only Jesus, and his blood shed for us on the cross.

Colin Blacket - Pinery SA

Tuesday, 2nd December

A Green Hill - Without a City Wall

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. ... Matthew 1:21-22

As a small boy, I loved Jesus as all little children who know him do. So I remember vividly the deep pain I experienced when I learned that Jesus had been crucified. My world fell apart, and I felt hurt that God could not prevent this happening to the one I loved. No-one could explain this to my satisfaction. Of course, I knew no Greek or Hebrew then, so I could not know that his very name prophesied that he should die to save his people, including me, from our sins. An even deeper truth is revealed in verse 23: “Immanuel — God with us!” It is Yahweh God himself who paid for our salvation with his life!

Something else I remember is Cecil Frances Alexander’s beautiful hymn, “There is a green hill ...” but I understood little of what it meant, including why a green hill should have, or not have, a city wall! Later I came to understand it had to do with my finding out that Jesus was crucified. So I experience some of the pain of those days each time I sing it, but it fills my heart with love again for the one who went to the cross for me:

*We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains he had to bear;
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.*

*There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.*

*O dearly, dearly has he loved,
And we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood,
And try his works to do.*

Prayer We thank you Father for your dear Son, and for his dying love for us. What love he had! What love you had to endure the pain of his suffering! Fill our hearts with your love, O Lord, that we may love you with heart, soul and strength, and we may bless our neighbours too with your love. Amen

Barrie Robinson - Launceston

Wednesday, 3rd December

All for love's sake becamest poor

She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in strips of cloth used for the backs of animals and laid him in the cattle feeding trough. The guest room was full. Luke 2:7

In Australia today a young couple expecting their first child sets about preparing for the baby: they paint a room as a nursery, acquire a bassinet, a cot, a change table, a baby bath, a highchair, bedding, towels, swaddling cloths, nappies, grow-suits and fancier clothes, knowing that the baby bonus will cover the cost.

Mary and Joseph were far simpler and seemingly unprepared. The child was wrapped in strips of animal blankets and put in the animals' feed trough. That Mary did this herself points to a lonely birth. That the guest room was full suggests that the couple arrived late or that the innkeeper or householder, seeing Mary's condition, did not want to accommodate them. Everything in the account points to poverty, obscurity and scandal – which Jesus knew for his whole earthly life.

It was probably not necessary that Mary go to Bethlehem for the census; Joseph's attendance would suffice. Perhaps he did not want to leave her in Nazareth at the mercy of the gossips. It was a combination of this decision and the decree of the Emperor that brought Mary to Bethlehem at just the time to fulfil the prophecy about the birthplace of the Messiah. (Micah5:2)

God still works through all sorts of people and circumstances to carry out his purposes.

**Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor,
*Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor.***

(Frank Houghton)

Margaret Macmillan - Arthurs Creek

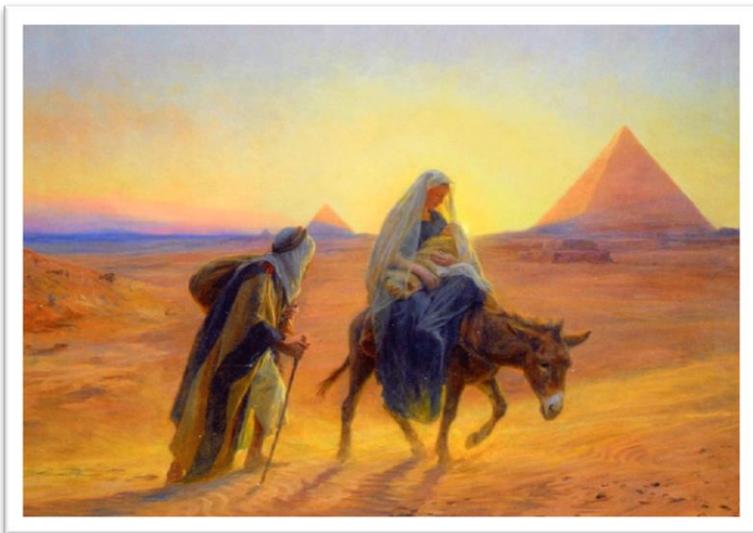
Thursday, 4th December

The Great Escape

Now after they had left, an Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

Matthew 2:13-15.

Any unreal image of the Christmas story that we may have inherited can only be quickly shattered by these telling verses. Herod’s thirst for power and his paranoiac grasp of the throne drove him in desperation to try to kill the infant King of the Jews. On receiving warning, Joseph is immediately obedient and under the cover of darkness he seeks asylum by escaping with the child and his mother. The Egyptian border was 128 kms away from Bethlehem and the near trauma associated with the slaughter of infants, sorrowing mothers and the urgency of the arduous journey would have all been mixed together.



Matthew knew that his Jewish readers were familiar with a similar experience. They had been crushed and exploited as slaves by the despots of Egypt. The dramatic, hurried escape of their forefathers and the punishing Exodus journey was still indelibly etched on the collective mind of the nation.

In some ways it could be said that amid the aspiring humanism of our time, today there is a striking, similar ring to the atrocities and the “*Herods*” of this world who still oppress and propagate death. They confront us with the harsh reality of our own abuse of power and the insidious plight of the human condition.

Matthew sees Jesus' story as a fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures. The events of Jesus' life call Israel to reflect on their collective national redemption from Egypt. In an amazing way **Israel as God's 'son'** had been redeemed. Later the prophets had inspired the hope and longing of a coming Messiah. Now **Jesus, the true Israel-God's Son**, has come and a specific redemption is at hand. Jesus is one of them yet he is **the Son**, the incarnate God who has come to be King.

From the beginning Jesus was opposed and threatened just as Christians are in most parts of the world today but we worship God, the King who reigns forever and ever rather than the Herods or the Emperors of this world. John's Gospel reminds us that Jesus, the light, shines in this insidious darkness "*yet the darkness did not overcome it.*" The infant Jesus-Messiah emerged from Egypt at the call of God to await his hour.

In the cross the rulers of the world set out to enslave and crush the King. Evil may seem to conquer until God calls his Son out of Egypt in resurrection. At the crucial moment in God's time and plan death itself is destroyed and Jesus is seen to be Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

When these living verses of God's Word point us to our own escape from sin, the powers of this world and the finality of death then the journey of Advent and Christmas is steeped in a profound new meaning. Being made one with Christ, we can say with Paul, "*We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*" To imprint his new standing with God on his mind John Newton had the words from Deuteronomy 15:15 written on the wall over his mantelpiece.

"Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman (a slave) in the land of Egypt and now the Lord thy God redeemed thee."

Prayer: Lord we know there is no guarantee that we will escape the tragedies or hostility of this world but we thank you that you have overcome them, once and for all. We thank you that we can rest in your sovereign plan for our lives and that as you protected the Christ child so we can be assured that in Jesus you have already "delivered us from all evil" and its power, There is a striking similar ring both now and for ever. Amen.

E.A. (Ted) Currow. 28.10.2014.

Friday, 5th December

God's Part and Our Part

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. 2 Corinthians 9:15

The birth of Jesus, which means Saviour, is undoubtedly the greatest event in the history of fallen mankind. In 2 Corinthians 9:15 Paul states: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift".

In 1975 my wife and I lived in America where we learnt about a very interesting legal case. It concerned a man who had been convicted of murder and had spent a long time in prison on death row. There had, however, been many serious doubts regarding the soundness of his guilty verdict.

A group of lawyers finally convinced the governor of the state to issue a pardon to the prisoner. It was duly delivered but the prisoner refused to accept it. He argued that, since he had been wrongly convicted by the state, he would only accept it if it was personally handed to him by the governor. The governor refused and said, in effect, that "I've done all I'm going to do, now it's up to him".

The matter was referred to a court which, after lengthy debate, ruled that the pardon had no legal effect until it had been personally received by the prisoner.

Romans 3:23 states that: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" and Romans 6:23 states that: "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ".

Christmas is a time when we joyfully celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, but let's not forget that he grew into a man who died in our place at Calvary as our Saviour. God has done his part by offering us the free gift of salvation through Jesus. Our part is to reach out and accept this gift and give thanks to God for it.



Prayer: Lord, help us to see clearly that you sent your Son as a free gift to deal with mankind's sin and restore us to a right relationship with you. Help us to also understand that it is now up to us to repent of our sins and simply reach out and receive this free gift with thanksgiving.

Roger Bergen - Parkdale

Saturday, 6th December

The Precious name of Jesus

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus .

Luke 1:31

In the context of two young, starry-eyed, adolescent lovers in Shakespeare, a name has no meaning in itself: Romeo woos his Juliet telling her names don't matter: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

In the context of the bible, names do matter. A name carries the person and purpose of bearer of that name. An angel, seeing Joseph anxious and rejecting Mary his fiancée, because she was pregnant, appeared to him in a dream with words of eternal words of assurance, "...you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The name *Jesus* was not uncommon then – it was given to sons as a symbol of hope of a Messiah who would purify the Lord's people and save them politically. Here, the name goes further: this Jesus will save them *from their sins*. This name is revealed and means a lot.

In the following passage from a new book about theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, replace *grace* with *Jesus*, and see how that name brings life:

These three propositions— the holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and the person and work of Christ— form the essence of the gospel. They also form the backbone of spirituality, since they leave room for only one thing, grace. Grace comes to us not because of our merits or our accomplishments or our potential. Grace comes to us in spite of all these things...

"It's very hard ,” Luther once wrote, “for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can't grasp this.” We can't grasp grace because our natural instincts think more in terms of merits and demerits. And since we can't grasp grace, it grasps us. Grace grasps us at salvation and at every waking moment of our lives thereafter.¹

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

¹ Nichols, Stephen J. (2013-06-30). Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life: From the Cross, for the World (Theologians on the Christian Life) (Kindle Locations 543-552). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

Sunday, 7th December

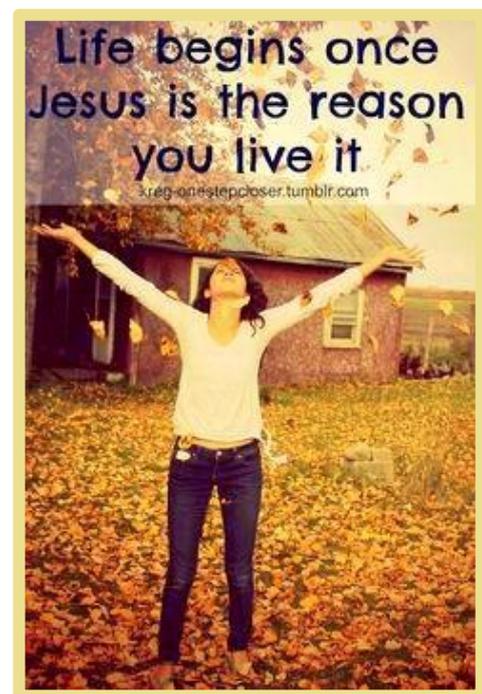
We Have Seen a Great Light

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The traditional Christmas Eve service of nine readings and carols, these days broadcast from Kings College Cambridge and watched by tens of millions worldwide, is known to have been started by the Bishop of Cornwall in 1880. The purpose was to keep men out of pubs and lift hearts and minds to humanity's higher calling: readings and carols recount the fall of humanity, the promise of the Messiah and the birth of Jesus. Beyond the beauty of Cathedral pageantry, perfected choral harmonies, and a splendiferous culture lies a serious message: humanity is in darkness. Mankind has been expelled from Eden's perfection and languishes, thrashing out against God and each other: are there not signs of this,

ugly and horrid, readily at hand in the daily news? In your own heart?



The greatest of seers, Isaiah in the Old Testament knew that. God gave him some news about it. Into this darkness the people would see a great light. That light is a child to be born, a son to be given. This is a gift of divine grace to sinners. This son is the king described in a series of superlative titles which sets forth the place of this birth in our hearts. He is wonderful counsellor, able to make wise plans, beyond human capabilities. He is mighty God, the name of God himself (Jer. 32:18). He is Everlasting Father, a benevolent protector in the way He himself cares for his people (Ps. 103:13). And he is Prince of

Peace because these nations in darkness will rely on his just decisions.

Isaiah's description of the child to be born is used of Jesus in the Gospels. Luke calls him the Son of the Most High. (Lk 1:32)

Heavenly Father, lift our hearts with joy to the birth of Jesus, our King, who breaks light into our darkness.

Paal Langkamp - Kensington

Monday, 8th December

Be Strong and Courageous

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

Recently my wife and I drove to the Queensland border to visit a relative whose health is failing. Passing through towns, it was a shock to see many former places of worship were now museums, art galleries or residences.

My great grandfather migrated from England in 1857, and after the 1860 “Unlocking of the Land Act,” he took up land in the Kyabram district. Taking his family to live in primitive temporary accommodation, they, along with other families, erected a “log church” which served for many years. First priority – a place of worship before homes.

How far from their expectations and hope for the sharing of God’s life-giving message we as a nation have fallen in four or five generations. The message from Joshua was foremost in many a new settler’s thinking and we are most grateful to them and our dear Saviour for their heeding Joshua’s word. This message we need to pass on to the next generation.

In this we should be strong and courageous, holding fast and firm to God’s word no matter what overwhelming challenges face us. Many times in the scriptures we see God’s almighty power demonstrated. For example, God used Gideon and 300 men to rout the enemy of thousands. Isaiah tells us that God holds the nations of the world in the palm of his hand which is very comforting in today’s troubled times. The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God shall stand forth! And that message has encouraged many, including soldiers of the Light Horse who charged Beersheba in 1916. Remember Deuteronomy 20: *for the Lord thy God is with thee... let not your heart faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified...* Someone has said one man and God is a majority in any situation.

Thankfully, he is with us today in the sending of his Holy Spirit. We can have constant communication with him through prayer and reading His word, obeying His word and allowing the Holy Spirit who lives in the life of every believer to do the work He came to do.

Dear Heavenly Father we are thankful for those who have gone before and set our nation in a direction based on your Holy Commandments. We earnestly pray that you will give us courage to further your work here on earth.

Laurie Poole - Drouin

Tuesday, 9th December

"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."

Luke 1:31

Gabriel, of course, was an important angel: he delivered messages from God. Months before appearing to Mary, in Luke's account, he had appeared to Zachariah, and five hundred years before that, to Daniel; always with messages of hope:

To Daniel, Gabriel gave interpretations in flummoxing times.

To Zachariah, a worthy priest, it was news of impending fatherhood. "How can it be?" asked Zachariah, "I'm old." For his fearful, fading heart, Zachariah become dumb until the babe was born.

And then to Mary, a lowly quite young woman, betrothed but not yet married, the news, "*You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.*" Giving birth, giving birth to a son and naming the son, is not uncommon. But, "*How will this be*", she asked, "*since I am a virgin?*" Her heart, not fearful, but assured, "*No word of God will ever fail,*" answered the angel. And trusting entirely, she responded, "*I am the Lord's servant.*"

First notice Mary's trusting obedience. Bearing the indignity of being unmarried and curiously pregnant, she says, "*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*" Obedience is a sign of God's people: it changes everything. Nate Saint was one of five missionaries who were killed by the Auca Indians. He once said that his life did not change until he came to grips with the idea that "obedience is not a momentary option... it is a diecast decision made beforehand."

Notice also the name Mary is to give: Jesus. He is God's Son, it means '*the Lord saves*' and those who call on that name will be saved.

Heavenly Father give us obedience as of your servant Mary so that we may pray, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, in Jesus' name, Amen

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Wednesday, 10th December

The Word: Creator and Redeemer

In the beginning was the Word... Through him all things were made. John 1:3
The coming of Jesus that we Christians celebrate at Christmas has a vast, eternal context and an all-embracing purpose.

At the beginning of the world, the book of Genesis chapter 1 says, God spoke and things came into existence. After six days of speaking the physical world of sea and earth, animals of every shape, plants and every living thing, everything from molecule to human became. God had finished. John in his gospel says that that creating, speaking Word in Genesis was Jesus, the Christ. He was there in the beginning of creation. Jesus of Nazareth is the creating word.

This Christian idea of the origin of temporal things answers, why there is anything at all: more than just about the origins of humanity it is also about the connection of people to God. And Jesus Christ, being the same Word that created humanity, is also the redeemer of humanity. Creation and redemption are embodied in the same Word that is Jesus Christ.

Another thing comes out of this doctrine of Jesus the creating and redeeming Word: because the Word in God creates *from nothing*, God has the capacity to be represented in the natural world. God is not the natural world. St. Augustine puts the relationship between God and creation like this: *God fashioned the sensible things of this world to permit them to signify himself.*²

So, when we observe the beauty of the natural world – its glorious seasons and awesome mountains – and when we see the miracle of living objects that change – a seed becomes a plant and produces a flower – then we can praise God as he who created it, and we may praise Jesus Christ for our salvation.

We may pray [Folliott S. Pierpoint](#)'s hymn of 1864

**For the beauty of the earth, For the beauty of the skies,
For the Love which from our birth, Over and around us lies:
CHRIST, our GOD, to Thee we raise, This our Sacrifice of Praise.**

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

² Quoted in McGrath, Alister, *The Open Secret, A New Vision for Natural Theology*, p. 188

Thursday, 11th December

I Will Give You Rest

Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest for I am gentle and humble in heart.

Matthew 11:28-29

Jesus was not malleable: he was often confrontational. The verses preceding the *words of comfort* above, he denounced, in the strongest possible terms, those who refused to repent. Of impenitent persons, in a ring of towns, who had witnessed Jesus' miracles but rejected Jesus, he said; ... *it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.*

Then suddenly, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus becomes personal, offering abiding relief. "*Come to me...*" he said. His offer is not a philosophy and not a system. It is himself. And his offer goes to those who are weary and burdened. Burdensome weariness may be a bane of regular life – perhaps many bear such. A specific context prompts Jesus' remarks: burdens of religious behaviour imposed on people by clerics. Instead of imposing rules, Jesus offers himself. True, what Jesus offers he calls a *yoke* - actually an animal harness. Jesus' yoke fits like comfortable shoes unlike the bane of Judaic law. John wrote that to keep the commands of God is not burdensome. It is our love of God that we keep his commands and that is not burdensome . (1John 5:3)



"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"

Matthew 11:28 (KJV)

Jesus is gentle and humble in heart and his commandments don't bear upon us. Jesus is personable.

The exact opposite is self-pity that someone said, weeps on the devil's shoulder. The devil's invitation goes something like this, "*Come to me all who are peeved and disgruntled. I will feed your soul on fears, and indulge your ego with envy and spite. I will excuse you from every duty and hardship and permit you to yield to temptation.*"

Heavenly Father, weary we come to you seeking not selfish relief, but, with joy, to hold your commandments. We love you Lord. Bear with us. Always.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Friday, 12th December

No Room

She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7 (NIV)

The world rejected Jesus from the beginning. Jesus was, and is still largely rejected, and with hostility by many. Jesus' followers experience that same rejection and even persecution in many places in the world today. *Psalm 2: 1-2 Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed....."*

There was no welcome for the Heavenly King in the inn. His entry into the world was in the most humble of places and in the most humble of ways. It is right to celebrate His incarnation and recognise God's greatest of gifts. But Christmas has steadily changed over the years from a celebration of the birth of Jesus into what is mostly a commercial enterprise where we are all encouraged to spend more and more on gifts for family and friends reinforcing the materialism that prevails in our society.



For many, the modern way of rejecting Jesus is to displace Him from the centre of Christmas and replace Him with a sentimental celebration where the focus is on gifts, food, and family reunions, which are not wrong in themselves but are often the tools we use to put Jesus to one side.

There was no fanfare or recognition from earth that the Saviour of the world was born. However there was recognition from Heaven – an angel made the glorious announcement of the Royal birth to lowly shepherds and was then accompanied by “*a great company of the*

heavenly host praising God and saying 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will toward men'”.

Let us join with Heaven and sing our loudest praises to God for His greatest of gifts and to do this without distraction.

Prayer

Lord help us to always make room for You in our lives. May You be the all-important subject of our thoughts as we lift our hearts in praise for God's indescribable gift. Amen

Noel Taylor - Whittlesea

Saturday, 13th December

Mary was engaged to Joseph and travelled with him to Bethlehem. She was soon going to have a baby, and while they were there, she gave birth to her firstborn son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:5-7

Luke's account of Jesus' birth is terse. He gets the whole thing down in three brief sentences: Mary was pregnant, she and Joseph went to Bethlehem because they had to. She had the baby, wrapped him in baby clothes, and laid him on hay because there was no room in the inn. Being born, clothed and put to rest is such an everyday occurrence ; everyone, in way one or another, has experienced it.

Details scant, there is no shortage of imagination to put some in. Forced into a barn, the possibly rough, harshness of it gets transformed into a sort of idyllic comfort of a romantically different camping tour complete with mood lighting, freshly-washed, clean-smelling, silk-like garments, boxes of well-wishers' gifts, all of them nice, arrayed animals decorating the scene and all of them looking as cute as airport, fluffy-stuffed souvenir dolls, and in the middle, the happy couple, unruffled and satisfied, looking with awed interest at this newborn baby that has come among them.

That picture is not bad – it gathers up emotion in one image that says it all: that is Luke's point. This Jesus, that the angel has already announced is of God, is fully human. He comes in the physical reality of human life, in the flesh, born of Mary. That fact is expressed in the Nicene Creed, which we recite Sunday by Sunday and



which is authoritative for the Uniting Church. Athanasius, who fought for the Nicene Creed, knew the crucial fact: if Christ had not assumed flesh, we would not be redeemed. That is cause for our rejoicing: that is what we see in a cute nativity image.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Sunday, 14th December

Angels visit the Shepherds

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Luke 2:10-12

As I sit on this windy day to write this devotion I’m remembering over 2000 years ago when the Jews were waiting for the Messiah. I’m also thinking of our expected first grandchild who will be born at the end of December. The waiting for the new baby, hoping for a healthy one, is exciting. I know it’s not the same as our Redeemer but to me it’s another step along my path of growing older but still learning how great the Messiah is.



The Messiah was born and an angel spoke to some shepherds in the field. The shepherds were afraid but the angel said ‘Do not be afraid, go to Bethlehem to see the baby’. The shepherds were people who were uneducated.

God uses people who are humble to be enlightened about our Saviour. God uses people who are ordinary to be lights to the world. Believe in God and yourselves. Do not be afraid to stand up for God.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for sending the Messiah, your Son, to continually remind us that although we are adults we are children of God, always learning as we explore Your Word. Amen.

Gillian Williams - Swan Hill

Monday, 15th December

Mary's Magnificat

**Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord,
Rejoice, rejoice, my spirit, in God my saviour;
So tenderly has he looked upon his servant, humble as she is.**

**For, from this day forth,
all generations will count me blessed,
So wonderfully has he dealt with me,
The Lord, the Mighty One.**

**His name is Holy;
his mercy sure from generation to generation
toward those who fear him;
the deeds his own right arm has done disclose his might:
the arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout,
he has brought down monarchs from their thrones,
but the humble have been lifted high.
The hungry he has satisfied with good things,
The rich sent empty away.**

**He has ranged himself at the side of Israel his servant;
firm in his promise to our forefathers,
he has not forgotten to show mercy to Abraham
and his children's children, for ever.**

Luke 1:26-45 New English Bible

Hymn: Tell Out My Soul

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3E7QWLyDWe8>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf3mgRUZkAk>

Tuesday, 16th December

Who Christ is and What He has done

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. John 5:30

Mary's overwhelming exultation to the Lord was not misplaced. Jesus later revealed who he is and what he does. In John's gospel, in awkward circumstances defending himself against charges of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus said, "*I can do nothing on my own.*"

In saying this, Jesus reaffirms what he has been saying all along: he is equal to his father. He is fully divine. He made much the same claim in verse 17 of the same chapter. "*My Father is working until now and I am working.*"

And what does he do? In this passage Jesus makes three claims: to give eternal life (vs. 24), to be the source of life (vs. 26) and to judge sin (vs. 27). Death is not the end of a nicely worked out, stress-less life: Jesus will ask for account.

And how does he judge? Jesus says, "*As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.*" Jesus judgement is just because those who believe in him may rest in the love that exists between the Father and the Son.

And what does this mean for our life as followers of Jesus? David Brainerd was a great missionary to American Indians. He died before age 30. He once said that when a Christian realizes who Christ is and what Christ has done for him so graciously, it tends to have a dramatic effect on this life, not only in salvation but in holiness.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington



Wednesday, 17th December

Our Tradition and our heart

For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me.

Luke 1:48-49

How is it that we may share in Mary's praise to God? A generation ago, famous Scottish-American preacher, Peter Marshall, wrote words that, within our tradition of Christmas celebration, still ring true:

Let's not permit the crowds and the rush to crowd Christmas out of our hearts... for that is where it belongs, Christmas is not in stores – but in the hearts of people.

Let's not give way to cynicism and mutter that “Christmas has become commercialized.” It will never be – unless you let it be.

Let's not succumb to the sophistication that complains: “Christmas belongs only to the children.” That shows that you have never understood Christmas at all, for the older you get, the more it means.

Have you been saying, “I just can't seem to feel the Christmas spirit this year”? That's too bad. As a confession of lack of faith, it is rather significant.

You are saying that you feel no joy that Jesus came into the world... You are confessing that His presence in the world is not a reality to you... Maybe you need all the more to read the Christmas story over again, need to sit down with Gospel of Luke and think about it...

And then you will remember what Christmas means – the beginning of Christianity... the Second Chance for the world... the hope for peace... The promise that the angels sang is the most wonderful music the world has ever heard. “Peace on earth and good will toward men.” That is a promise – God's promise – of what one day will come to pass.

So we will not “spend” Christmas... nor “observe” Christmas. We will “keep” Christmas – keep it as it is... in all the loveliness of its ancient traditions.

May we keep it in our hearts, that we may be kept in its hope.

Paal Langkamp - Kensington

Thursday, 18th December

You shall... bear a son,... “Son of the Most High”;... king over Israel for ever: his reign shall never end.
Luke 1:31-33

A lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Revelation 13:8

And behold one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven and... every eye shall see him.
Daniel 7:13 & Revelation 1:7

Francis Schaeffer, the famous 1960's Christian apologist, held, as the Uniting Church also holds, to the Westminster Confession's 'unity of Scripture': one portion of the bible interprets another. What is the unity of these three disparate bible quotes?

The book of Daniel is a template for living faithfully to God within a pagan world: God vindicates his servants, humbles the proud and raises the humble; God of creation is the God of history. The vision of chapter 7 is the *Son of Man*, who is God, coming as on clouds, visible to all, to establish his reign in history. God is sovereign over the course of history.

This same name for God in the book of Daniel, *Son of the Most High*, is used by Luke. It is the angel Gabriel informing Mary that she will become pregnant and bear that same *Son*, the same who will be *king over Israel for ever*.

Jump to the bible's last book of prophecy, Revelation, the same image from Daniel 7 used, the *Son of Man will come on the clouds* – and that coming is Christ's universal dominion. Revelation 13:8 makes that point, *and all who dwell on earth will worship it*.

Furthermore, that Son of Man is the Christ, *the Lamb who was slain*. So the Lord judges the kingdoms of the world, brings them to an end, casts away those who do not worship him, and establishes his own kingdom.



Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you that your scripture is consistent and unified so that we see the Son of Man in Daniel is the same king over Israel and the same Jesus who will come again.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Friday, 19th December

Renew our Hearts

“I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” John 3:12

Nicodemus’ at the end of the fourth Gospel joins with Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus. Nicodemus grew into that act of devotion. A Pharisee on the powerful Jewish Council in Jerusalem, Nicodemus was at first fascinated by Jesus’ miracles and character.

His first act was, under cover of darkness to avoid embarrassing detection, to seek out Jesus to sort it. Jesus, typically, tested the man’s understanding by putting to him a fundamental distinction between flesh and spirit, *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”* (vs. 6) The Kingdom of God is of the spirit. As a learned, prominent Jew, Nicodemus should have understood: this new life of the spirit is like the resurrection of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, and the new heart in Ezekiel 36:26. The new heart the Father gives, to have it is to be born again. It happens on earth, hence Jesus says, in John 3:12 above, it is an earthly thing. And yet Nicodemus did not understand: he was puzzled and asked, incredulously, about entering a mother’s womb a second time. How can Jesus speak to him of the miraculous signs of healing as of the Kingdom of God, if Nicodemus does not see the changes taking place in the hearts of believers? Perhaps the idea of the Kingdom beginning in the hearts of men, hearts transformed by the Spirit, was revolutionary to Nicodemus. God’s Kingdom, he may have thought, would surely be political.



Nevertheless, Nicodemus did not shy away. In chapter 7 he engaged in discussion, and later wrapped Jesus’ crucified body.

Heavenly Father, renew our hearts with your Spirit. Begin your Kingdom in our hearts which otherwise would be trapped in, thrashed in sin. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Saturday, 20th December

Whoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save it

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save it.”

Mark 8: 34-35

The coming of Jesus has come to this: he calls his disciples and the crowds of us to follow him. To the crowds Jesus is an attractive lure: he feeds thousands, does miraculous healings and restores sight. Yet Jesus' call to follow him is not a promise of an easy paradise, nor even a promise of mutual tolerance and acceptance, and not a promise of satisfying accomplishments. His call is a warning couched as a conditional possibility: *“If you would come after me...”* The very crowd whom Jesus calls - the disciples already know because he has just privately told them - will reject him. Jesus will be killed, yet he tells them: *“If you would come after me then deny yourself and take up your cross.”* The message is clear. The condemned prisoner carried their own crucifixion cross: to follow Jesus is to go with him to our crucifixion. Crucifixion is to deny self: that is abandonment of self-will. Jesus calls those who follow him to accept his direction. Instead of sin, Christ is our destiny. *Whoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save his life.*



And the saved life is to be with Christ. Timothy puts it this way in his second letter: *“if we endure, we will also reign with him, if we deny him, he also will deny us.”*

Paradoxically, the denied self also finds soul's rest. Matthew records it: *“For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

Heavenly Father, bear with us as we deny self, follow Jesus, and hold to you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Sunday, 21st December

Crossing cultural barriers

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (Matt. 2:2)

This is a reading which rightly belongs in the Church calendar, to the season of Epiphany, after Christmas - the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. For Matthew, the arrival of these learned astrologers spoke of the Messiah's ultimate relationship with the non-Jewish world. Indeed, the Magi, could have come from any of several locations. They may have been black men, from Africa, or they may have been a multi-racial group.

In his biography, *Gumbuli of Ngukurr*, which is really the story of the *Roper River Mission*, Murray Seiffert, a Melbourne writer, outlines the life story of a modern aboriginal saint. CMS worked in this part of Northern Australia and also in East Africa. So it was not surprising when in 1959 a perceptive leader, arranged for one of the leaders of the East African revival, Bishop Festo Kivengere to spend a month in Arnhem Land.

He was uniquely equipped for ministry to the aboriginal Church. He came from a background of traditional worship which meant appeasing the evil spirits. This was a problem faced by the aboriginal church. Festo's family, like many in East Africa, were cattle herders; many of the aboriginals had worked on cattle stations. It was a perfect fit.

Word travelled fast amongst the aborigines and from being initially shy and distant, the people became so friendly, that it began to embarrass Festo. They followed him around the compounds, watched the way he ate, stared at his clothes, his hair, his skin . . .

One aboriginal man stood up in a meeting and said, *“We are so glad that a brother in Christ has come here. He speaks of the same Jesus we know; he speaks of the same love of God we know. He tells us the things which the missionaries have told us for years, but now we can see clearly that Jesus Christ is also the Saviour of the black people.”* (p. 126)

Prayer : O Lord, may we, like the wise men of the East, and like Christians across the ages, be prepared to cross cultural barriers with the good news of the Gospel. AMEN.

Malcolm Macmillan - Arthur's Creek

Monday, 22nd December

Advent Reflections

No eye has seen, nor ear heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him. – 1Cor 2.9

The Bible tells us that we are made of three basic components – body, mind or soul, and spirit (1Thes 5.23, 3Jn 1.2). In our mortal tent, in this life, we are familiar with body – we walk, we use arms and hands, we see, we hear, we eat, drink and breathe. We are also familiar with mind though largely ignorant of how it works. We analyse, we create, we remember – we call this thinking. We can communicate our thinking to others by speaking, hearing and seeing, as in writing and drawing. But of the third component, the spirit, we have very little knowledge, and for most people, even less familiarity. Yet the spirit realm exists – God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4.24). The Holy Spirit of God leads into all truth (Jn 16.13).

In the spirit, we are taken into “the third heaven” (2 Cor12.2), where we have wonderful things to see, and ‘inexpressible words’ to hear, that God has prepared for those who love Him. The Holy Spirit leads us. We can develop an increasingly intimate relationship with our creator God. As we press into God for his truth, he reveals himself more and more. When we cast off these mortal coils we will see its full grandeur.

But what while in our earthly tent? Have you ever felt to pray for something which you felt was fairly modest, or improbable or even unattainable in the natural? You had no idea as to how it would work out, but in obedience and in faith and in trust, you persevered in prayer. And it turned out that the final result was much grander than your wildest dreams! Our minds could not conceive of how this would happen, but God in His infinite power and love was able to do something far greater than we could imagine.

Father, we pray in Jesus’ name, that we never forget the love You have for those who seek You and follow You, and the mighty power You exercise for those who trust in You. We are thankful, humbled and honoured by the goodness You bestow upon us in this life and the next. *Frank Reale -Whittlesea*

Tuesday, 23rd December

Worship the Saviour Heart and Soul

(Balam prophesied) I see someone who is not here now. I look at someone who is not nearby. A star will come from Jacob. A sceptre will rise from Israel.

Numbers 24:17

John Wesley's sermon number 2 – which the Uniting Church *learns from* – describes the *Almost Christian*: a person who has regard for truth and justice, having a form of godliness and doing extensive works of deep kindness, doing nothing forbidden and even acting with integrity and using, what Wesley called, the means of grace. *Almost Christians*, however, are not Christian at all. The *Altogether Christian*, Wesley notes, loves God. He wrote, *This kind of love engrosses the whole heart, includes all the affections, fills completely the entire soul and employs the power of love to the utmost. When you love the Lord God like this, your spirits continually rejoice in God your Saviour.*

Balam, whose story is told in Numbers, almost might have loved God: he knew the truth. And his outstanding *good work* was to prophecy, *A star will come from Jacob*: a prophecy fulfilled first with King David, but ultimately with the coming Messiah Jesus. Yet Balam was motivated by greed; in due course returned to his native Moab and was eventually killed in war. Peter mentions Balam in his second letter, ch. 2, as one of those, *revelling in their deceptions... eyes insatiable for sin... forsaking the right way have gone astray*. Balam even encouraged the Israelites to worship idols. (Numbers 31:6) The *Altogether Christian*, Wesley describes:

2.5 — is not only to believe that Holy Scripture is true and to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ. It is a sure trust and confidence which a person has- in God, that, by the merits of Christ, their sins are forgiven, and they are reconciled to the favour of God; and from that comes a loving heart, to obey his commandments.



Prayer: Heavenly Father, give us a sure trust and assurance, that fills our entire heart, that by the merits of Christ, our sins are forgiven and we may perfectly love you.

Paul Largkamp - Kensington

Wednesday, 24th December

Jesus is Amazing

Everyone who heard the shepherd's story was amazed. Luke 2:18

In a modern age that doubts everything, the idea of a god at all would be amazing: the impact, if a god were to be met, would be shock of overwhelming surprise that such a thing could be seen and therefore known to be true.

In Jesus' age, the idea of god abounded. And yet, in the gospel of Luke, especially the NIV bible, Jesus had numerous this-world encounters that had people amazed.

Jesus aged 12, in the temple, gave answers that amazed people. Later, older and teaching in the temple, people were amazed at the gracious words that came from Jesus' lips. In Capernum people were amazed because he taught with authority and expelled demons. Onlookers were amazed – and praised God - when a cripple took up his bed and walked. Even Jesus himself was amazed – at the faith of a Roman centurion who had come to Jesus and to ask for a miracle to heal his sick daughter. And onlookers watching Jesus heal a child with a demon, *were all amazed at the greatness of God.*

The Christmas story was not without moments of amazement. An angel of Lord appeared in a field and said to cowering shepherds, *"Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; [11] for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."* And the host of heaven sang [14] *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"* And everyone who heard that story was amazed: Did angels not appear? Is the Saviour really come? Did a host proclaim God's glory?

Mary was not amazed. She pondered these reports in her heart.

Heavenly Father, you are amazing, I am flabbergasted and perhaps in a moment nonplussed: speechless my socks are knocked off. While we were yet sinners, you sent your son Jesus to redeem us and your world. Lord, accept the praise of my heart that bubbles with inexpressible joy that you have come in Jesus, for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington

Thursday, 25th December

The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Luke, in Chapter 1, describes the first Christmas straight: the angel Gabriel, to a young Mary, announced the pregnancy, named the event holy and named the babe Jesus. The humble Mary acquiesced, believed that news and in the event, the baby was born lowly in a stable, wrapped and put in an animal manger.

John, in his simple and breathtaking introduction to his gospel, goes to the magnificence and significance of that birth: God, the one who created the universe, and everything, was that baby Jesus.

The Word – For Greeks this indicated words spoken and words not spoken: it stood for reason. For Jews, this referenced God. Jesus was God in the fullest sense.

Became – Jesus existed before he became man.

Flesh – a strong word, almost crude, that stresses the reality of Jesus' humanity.

Dwelt among us and we have seen his glory – to dwell is to be present in same way that Lord had dwelt in the Jerusalem tabernacle. Jesus' miracles reveal his glory.

Grace and truth – a significant Christian word. Used in greetings, as in Galatians

1:3, and shows God's manner in coming to us as in Romans 5:20 *Where sin increased, grace abounded.*

Truth - John uses the word , 25 times. Jesus himself is the truth. *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (Jn. 14:6)



Heavenly Father, you have come to us in Jesus so that we may come to you. Our hearts overflow with joy and praise. Give us your grace and your truth so that we may be worthy of you.

Paul Langkamp - Kensington